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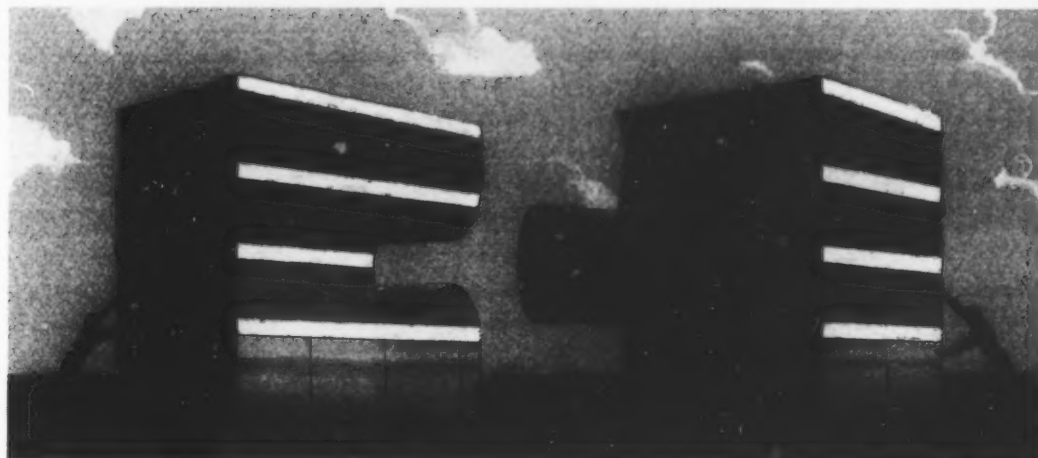
ABSTRACT

This report, drawing on a wide variety of public opinion data, is the first to compare public perceptions of K-12 and higher education. Differences in perceptions are discussed in seven categories: (1) knowledge of the systems; (2) perceptions of their quality; (3) assignment of responsibility between students and the institutions; (4) who pays for the costs; (5) safety, discipline, and dealing with basic learning; (6) who has access; and (7) understanding of the alternatives of privatization, vouchers, and charter schools. The report does not examine the accuracy of the reported perceptions. The report concludes that higher education still is viewed as different and better than K-12, and that it is immune to many of the criticisms leveled at K-12. However, there are some signs of erosion in higher education's stronger position; leadership groups, especially business executives, are equally critical of both systems, with a shared concern that K-12 schools are not adequately preparing students for higher education. These leaders, aware that K-12 educators feel that colleges are not adequately training teachers, believe that K-12 and higher education must work together more closely. (Contains 26 endnotes.) (RH)

DOING COMPARATIVELY WELL

Why the Public Loves Higher Education and Criticizes K-12

By John Immerwahr



IEL



A Report from The Institute for Educational Leadership,
The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education,
and Public Agenda

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PERSPECTIVES IN PUBLIC POLICY:
CONNECTING HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A Series Published by The Institute for Educational Leadership
and The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

DOING COMPARATIVELY WELL:

Why the Public Loves Higher Education And Criticizes K-12

By John Immerwahr
Public Agenda

*A Report from The Institute for Educational Leadership,
The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education
and Public Agenda*

October 1999

PERSPECTIVES IN PUBLIC POLICY:
CONNECTING HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A Series Published by
The Institute for Educational Leadership and
The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

K-16 Report #99-03

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FOREWORD

Doing Comparatively Well is an important contribution to "Perspectives in Public Policy: Connecting Higher Education and the Public Schools," a series co-sponsored by The Institute for Educational Leadership and The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. Both organizations are pleased that Public Agenda has joined us as co-publisher and co-sponsor of *Doing Comparatively Well*.

This is the first report we know of that compares public perceptions of K-12 and higher education. John Immerwahr, senior research fellow at Public Agenda and author of this report, has woven together, in a thoughtful and provocative way, the findings of a number of research projects conducted by Public Agenda and several other organizations. Immerwahr highlights differences, similarities and possible areas of future convergence in public perceptions of schools and colleges.

This report, like others in the series, was commissioned to assist policymakers who are seeking to stimulate and support educational policies that improve educational opportunity and student achievement in an increasingly interdependent K-16 education system that is challenged to focus more on student progress and less on organizational and institutional boundaries. We believe that public policymakers and leaders at all educational levels must be aware of and speak to the interests and concerns of the public at large and of opinion leaders. We are grateful to John Immerwahr and to Public Agenda for the insights that *Doing Comparatively Well* offers concerning this task.

Patrick M. Callan
President

The National Center for Public Policy
and Higher Education

Michael D. Usdan
President

The Institute for Educational Leadership

INTRODUCTION

James Harvey, the senior staff writer of *A Nation at Risk* and author of dozens of other education reports, recounts his arrival as an immigrant to the United States in the 1950s. His uncle, already a citizen, took him aside and said, "Jim, if you want to make it in the United States, you need a high school diploma." That advice is now hopelessly outdated; today the advice would be, "Get a college degree."

What this story indicates is that, for all practical purposes, a college degree has now replaced the high school diploma as a necessary ticket for a good job and a secure middle-class lifestyle. By a margin of almost ten to one (86% to 9%), Americans feel that a high school graduate should go to college rather than take a decent job right out of high school.¹ Ninety-six percent of high school students say that it is important to go to college and 74% report that their parents will be very disappointed in them if they don't go to college.² In focus groups across the country, people invariably stress the importance of a higher education in today's high-tech, knowledge-intensive economy. In the past, a college education was perceived as something for the elite few, whereas today a postsecondary education is perceived as the normal track for most students.

Given that a college degree has become as essential today as a high school degree was in the past, one might expect attitudes toward higher education to shift as well. It might be reasonable to expect that, since college has become, in effect, an extension of the normal educational path, people would begin to think of college education with a mindset similar to what they bring to their thinking about K-12. Our research, however, suggests the exact opposite. The public thinks of the two systems in very different circumstances. In terms of miracle household substances, higher education is currently "Teflon-coated" and remarkably immune to many criticisms. By contrast, K-12 is seemingly wrapped in Velcro, so that when criticisms are thrown, they often stick. Specifically, higher education seems to be immune to the criticisms that are often leveled against K-12. The sharp difference in attitudes has important implications for education policy.

Sources

This report draws on a wide variety of public opinion data, including national public opinion surveys by Public Agenda and by other organizations, statewide surveys done by Public Agenda in Missouri, Connecticut and South Carolina, and dozens of focus groups conducted across the country. Some of the most useful studies are:

- *Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education.*
- *The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education.*
- "Reality Check," featured in *Education Week's Quality Counts*, and
- *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform.*

Information about these and other studies is available from The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (www.highereducation.org) and Public Agenda (www.publicagenda.org). Public Agenda's web site has a wealth of public opinion data on many subjects.

Higher education is currently "Teflon-coated" and remarkably immune to many criticisms. By contrast, K-12 is seemingly wrapped in Velcro, so that when criticisms are thrown, they often stick.

Although the public sees the two systems in very different terms, there are other important subgroups—especially the business community—who see the two systems in much more similar terms. As we shall see, while the public has a much more favorable impression of higher education than of K-12, business leaders have similar (and often highly critical) views of both systems.

Three caveats should be kept in mind:

- **Perceptions only.** This report deals only with the public's attitudes, perceptions and values regarding K-12 and higher education. We are only trying to describe these views, and we make no attempt to assess the accuracy of the public's perceptions.
- **Community colleges and four-year institutions.** Much of what we report here is based on Public Agenda surveys. In those surveys, we defined higher education as including both two-year community colleges and four-year colleges and universities. So, for example, when our respondents say that a high school graduate should go on to get a college degree, they may be thinking of either a two-year or a four-year degree.
- **Focus groups.** Some interpretations in this paper are based on focus group interviews rather than on survey data. While focus groups can be suggestive in helping us understand public perceptions, they yield hypotheses for further study rather than quantitative data. These findings will be tested and explored in an upcoming study.

Table 1 summarizes the major differences in the public's views of higher education and K-12 education. A more complete discussion appears on the following pages.

1. KNOWLEDGE

K-12: Everyone's an Expert. In interviews with school superintendents, we frequently heard a variation of this remark: "Since everyone in the community went to school, they all think they are experts on the subject." In the dozens of focus groups we conducted on K-12 education, we found that people know, or at least think they know, a great deal about the schools in their communities. In focus groups on other subjects, people frequently illustrate their remarks by referring to something they saw on TV, but in discussions of the schools, people almost always refer to their own experiences with their children, grandchildren, or with the children of their friends. In one of our national studies, we explicitly asked people for the source of their information on public schools. Only 40%

Table 1

Major Differences Between Attitudes Toward K-12 vs. Higher Education

	<i>K-12</i>	<i>Higher Education</i>
Knowledge	High: people know, or think they know, a lot about K-12.	Highest measured "knowledge gap" (defined as difference between how concerned people are and how much they know about the subject).
Quality	Public schools get low marks from the public, especially on specific items.	Generally perceived as a world-class product.
Responsibility	People see individual motivation as important in K-12 education, but the public also sees problems with K-12 students as, at least partially, the responsibility of the school.	Individual students (rather than colleges) are seen as being responsible for student problems.
Who pays?	Perceived as paid for by local community.	Perceived as paid for by individual consumers.
Safety, discipline, the basics	Top public concerns. Large gaps between how important these items are to the public and how effective people think the schools are in delivering on them.	Colleges are seen as safe, with the major physical threats coming from outside of higher education. Colleges' problems with the basics are blamed on poor preparation in K-12.
Access	Taken for granted by public.	Tremendous concern to public: the worry is that many qualified students can't attend. Leaders are much less concerned.
Alternatives	Low public interest in privatization, growing interest in vouchers, charter schools.	Lack of clear distinction between public and private, comfort with state support for private colleges, and, among leaders, a growing interest in for-profit alternatives.

said they got the most useful information from the media; over half said that they relied primarily on their own experience or conversations with people they know.³ This high level of knowledge makes sense: the schools are close by, and people see young people on a daily basis.

Higher Education: The Knowledge Gap. The level of knowledge completely changes when the focus switches to higher education. People know very little about what actually goes on in institutions of higher education. Many Americans have not attended college, and many communities do not have a local higher education institution. Even those who have children in college often do not have (or need to have) anything like the level of contact with the college that they had with the K-12 schools.

2. PERCEIVED QUALITY

K-12: Under-performers. Public schools have been in the news a great deal in recent years, and the public has been bombarded with stories about how children in other countries outperform American children in one subject or another. Nationwide, schools get low grades from the public. In a recent Phi Delta Kappa survey, only 18% of the public gave schools nationwide a grade of A or B. As is well known, people tend to give schools in their own areas higher grades, and,

indeed, nearly half (46%) gave their local schools an A or a B.⁴ Public Agenda's studies have shown, however, that when people are probed about specific factors, the scores begin to drop, even for local schools. Our statewide studies suggest that when people say that their local schools are doing well, they often mean that they are doing well compared to schools in other (worse-off) areas, and not that schools are doing a good job compared to what they should be doing.

Higher Education: A World-Class Product. Higher education, by contrast, has a much better reputation in the public's mind. In focus groups, people often spoke with pride of their local universities, and had great respect for some research (especially medical research). In addition, there is a widespread awareness that students come from all over the world to attend American institutions of higher education.

Although people are concerned about the price of higher education, many people feel that college is worth the money. A study by the American Council on Education asked members of the general public to compare the value of a variety of different products. Fifty-nine percent said that a four-year college education is usually worth the price, compared to 45% who said the same about food at the grocery store and only 27% who said the same about American cars.⁵ As a result, while many people think our K-12 institutions are losers compared to those in other countries, they see American colleges and universities as the best in the world.

3. RESPONSIBILITY

K-12: Schools Have a Responsibility to Help Students Succeed. In the public's view, individual motivation is a factor at every level of education. But when it comes to K-12 education, the public also believes that schools and classroom teachers have a great deal of responsibility for student problems. As a result, if there is a problem with a student, the public believes it is because schools and teachers are not clearly defining their expectations of students and also not holding the youngsters accountable. While people recognize that children bring lots of problems to the schools, they also blame the schools for the failure of students.

Putting it another way, many people feel that if schools really put enough time and energy into a youngster, they can usually help that child improve. For example, 75% of Americans say that almost all kids can learn and succeed in school given enough help and attention. Only 20% say that some kids won't learn or succeed no matter how much help they get.⁶

Higher Education: Students Are Responsible for Their Own Problems. When it comes to higher education, the locus of responsibility shifts dramatically. Once a student reaches college age, people seem to feel that it is up to the student to take responsibility for his or her own life. If a student drops out of college, the assumption is that the student was not sufficiently motivated.

When it comes to higher education, in other words, the public places enormous emphasis on individual motivation. With virtual unanimity (91% to 7%) people think that the benefit of a college education depends on how much effort the student puts into it as opposed to the quality of the college the student is attending.⁷

Once again, this comparison works to the benefit of higher education. In effect, when it comes to college, the public blames the problems on the consumer, rather than on the producer. For example, if a high school has a high dropout rate, people may worry and think that there is a problem that needs to be addressed. College dropout rates, by contrast, are much more acceptable to the public. In our focus groups, people seemed to regard it as normal and appropriate for a large number of students to drop out of college. In leadership surveys, we also see among some groups of leaders a low level of concern about college dropout rates. For instance, only 31% of business executives and only 26% of professors think that college dropout rates are too high.⁸

4. WHO PAYS, WHO PLAYS?

K-12: Highly Visible Revenue Sources. In focus groups, people made it very clear that they understand that the community itself pays for a large portion of K-12 education. The reason is obvious. On the one hand, K-12 students themselves pay nothing, so people realize that the funding must come from somewhere else. On the other hand, there are dedicated taxes to support the K-12 schools. Homeowners in the community write out substantial checks to pay for public education even when they have no children in the schools. The message comes through loud and clear: the taxpayers pay for the schools.

Higher Education: Apparently Tuition-Driven. By contrast, financial support and funding of higher education are shrouded in mystery as far as most people are concerned. Although we have not done surveys on this topic and there may be regional differences, people in some focus groups said that higher education is largely paid for by student tuition and fees. Some focus group respondents complained about unmotivated students, and remarked that these young people were wasting their time and their parents' money. We rarely heard focus

Financial support and funding of higher education are shrouded in mystery as far as most people are concerned.

group respondents say that these students were wasting the public's money.

The thinking of many people seems to go like this. They are aware that the students themselves pay tuition and fees, and they hear that these fees are rising. At the same time, support for higher education usually comes from general revenue sources, so it is not obvious to people that someone else is paying for higher education as well. Since people know very little about higher education finance, it is an easy jump to think that it is the students themselves who are paying for higher education. To put this another way, while people seem to be quite clear about the difference between a public high school (where students do not pay tuition) and a private high school (where they do), they are much less clear about the difference between a state university and a private university (which are both expensive for the individual student).

The fact that many people seem to regard even their state universities as, in effect, supported by tuition, even further takes the heat off higher education. If there are problems with a college, the problems are either the fault of the students or, at any rate, an issue between the consumers and the producers (rather than a public problem).

We found huge gaps between the importance of safety, discipline, and the basics on the one hand, and the performance of the schools in delivering on these goals on the other.

5. SAFETY, DISCIPLINE, THE BASICS

K-12: Falling Down on the Most Important Areas. When people talk about public schools, the areas they are most concerned about are safety, discipline, and teaching the basics. In surveys conducted by Public Agenda and other national survey organizations, these items invariably appear at the top of the public's list of priorities, and the surveys also document dissatisfaction with how the schools are doing in these areas. In several of our statewide surveys, we developed a way to measure the gap between how important something is to the public versus how well the schools are doing in that area. Whenever we asked these questions, we found huge gaps between the importance of safety, discipline, and the basics on the one hand, and the performance of the schools in delivering on these goals on the other. Table 2, drawn from our Missouri study, is typical of what we found across the country when we asked people what priority they would give to each of the following goals and how good a job the schools are doing in accomplishing them. It also shows the large gaps between the public's views of the importance of these goals and their perceptions of how well the schools are doing in achieving them. In focus groups these concerns also dominated the conversation, and indeed, teachers and students themselves identified these as major problems.

Table 2
K-12: Gaps Between Public Priorities and School Performance

<i>Goal</i>	<i>% saying a high priority</i>	<i>% saying doing a good job</i>	<i>Gap</i>
Teaching kids to respect authority	85%	25%	60%
Imposing stricter codes of discipline	79%	23%	56%
Ensuring that schools are free from weapons, gangs, crime	88%	33%	55%
Making sure students master the basics	91%	37%	54%

Source: *Committed to Change: Missouri Citizens and Public Education*. Public Agenda. Survey of 500 Missouri residents, conducted October 30 to November 7, 1995.

Although people give their local schools good marks overall, when they are probed on particular issues, their evaluations change. Nearly half of the public believes that a high school diploma (even from their local high school) does not guarantee that a student has mastered the basics.⁹

Higher Education: Safe, but Inheriting Poorly Prepared Students. Once again, colleges and universities seem to be immune to many of these criticisms. While the metal-detector at the K-12 school door has become the image of education in the 90s, colleges are generally perceived, by focus group participants, as safe and pleasant places to be. Indeed, much of the news coverage appears to be about violence inflicted on college students by outsiders (perhaps even the same violent teenagers who are terrorizing their own K-12 schools), rather than about intra-university violence. Campus drinking does, of course, make the news. But while people may not approve of college drinking, there is also a sense, among many focus group respondents, that college students have been drinking ever since there have been colleges.

People are often shocked by the discipline problems they hear about in the high schools, especially when compared to their memories of their own schools. Compared to their own experience, they literally cannot imagine the things they read about. College drinking, for better or for worse, is a familiar story. Even if this behavior is unacceptable, at least it is nothing new.

Our studies on the attitudes of leaders—business executives, legislators, and college administrators and faculty—are particularly striking in this regard. When these leaders were asked about various problems facing higher education, their highest concern (identified by 88% of the sample) was that too many new students are not adequately prepared for college work.¹⁰ In addition, approximately eight out of ten professors and a similar proportion of employers give recent high school graduates poor marks in areas such as grammar and spelling.¹¹

Higher education, in other words, is perceived to be free of the discipline and safety issues that are so troubling to the public about K-12. While people are aware that college graduates may not be meeting appropriate standards, some people are willing to blame the K-12 schools for bad preparation, rather than the colleges themselves.

To put it another way, what upset focus group respondents was their awareness of youngsters who cannot read, write, and make change. All of these skills are things that people believe the students should have acquired in high school. It is less clear to people what it is that students are supposed to learn in college, and, perhaps as a result, they are less outraged when students don't have mastery of those skills.

6. ACCESS

In most of the areas we have discussed so far, higher education seems to shine in comparison with K-12 education. The situation is different when it comes to access.

K-12: Access for All. Whatever else people say about public K-12 education, they never identify access to schooling as a problem. At least in the urban and suburban areas of the country, there never seems to be any question about the availability of K-12 education. It is only the quality that is in question, not access.

College: Slipping out of Reach. Access is the public's single biggest worry about higher education. People think that college is more important than it has ever been, but what scares them is that it may become priced out of reach for their children or for the children of other people like them. The issue is not the quality of higher education, but the ability of people to afford it. There is a strong majority of Americans (89%) who say that "we should not allow the price of a college education to keep students who are qualified and motivated to go to college from doing so."¹² At the same time, people are clearly worried about access. The public is pretty much evenly divided on the question of whether the majority of qualified people have the opportunity to go to college. Forty-nine percent feel that, in their state, most qualified people are able to go to college, while an equal number (45%) think that many qualified people don't have the opportunity to attend a college or university.¹³ [Interestingly, *leaders* are much more optimistic about the ability of qualified people in their state to get an education. Three quarters of the leadership group (75%) say that most

What scares the public is that college may become priced out of reach.

qualified people can find a way to pay for it. Only a fraction, 19%, thinks that many qualified people cannot find a way to pay for college.^{14]}

In thinking about K-12 education, in other words, people take access for granted, while they are deeply concerned about quality. In thinking about higher education, the public is sanguine about the quality of what is offered, but is deeply concerned that higher education may be unavailable to their children or to children of people like them. In the public's mind, higher education is much like health care. Many Americans are impressed by the miracles of modern medicine; what worries them is that it may be inaccessible to them. Higher education is increasingly occupying a similar place in people's minds; it is seen as an essential service that may be priced out of their reach.

7. ALTERNATIVES

K-12: Rising Support for Vouchers. The public's concerns about the quality of K-12 education have inspired some reformers to consider alternatives to public schools, such as charter schools or school vouchers. The public has only begun to think about this issue, and so far there is a lot of confusion and conflict in the public's thinking. On the one hand, people are clearly committed to the idea of public schools, which they see as the one remaining institution that brings children together to learn how to get along with different kinds of people. At the same time, almost six of ten parents with children currently in the public schools (57%) would send their children to private schools if they could afford to do so.¹⁵ While our focus groups suggest that people don't really understand what the voucher debate is about, the surveys also show a growing interest in the concept of vouchers. The Gallup organization has asked the same question about vouchers in several different years, and the trend seems to be one of growing support. The number of people who say they favor "allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense" has grown from 24% in 1993, to 33% in 1995, and to 44% in 1998.¹⁶

At the same time, Public Agenda has found virtually no national support for the idea that private companies could effectively take over the public schools, and many of the experiments with privatization have not attracted favorable attention.¹⁷

Higher Education: Can Business Do it Better? The differences between public and private institutions in higher education are much less clear to the public than the differences in public and private schools providing K-12 education. Indeed, some of the best colleges and universities in the country are public

Whereas the public seems to make a distinction between K-12 and higher education, at least some groups of leaders seem to be highly critical of both.

institutions. In effect, the country already has an elaborate voucher system for higher education in the form of Pell grants, guaranteed student loans and subsidized work-study programs. All of these financial aid supports can be used for either public or private schooling. For that matter, the distinction between public and private systems in higher education is much less clear, even to policymakers themselves. (Many state higher education systems now charge high tuition and seek philanthropic support, just as the private systems do.)

Although it may not yet have registered on the public's radar screen, there is a great deal of interest within the leadership community in the effectiveness of for-profit alternatives to traditional higher education systems. The for-profit University of Phoenix is widely discussed as an alternative model that may make deep inroads into the "education market."

A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Despite the fact that a college degree may be as essential today as a high school degree was in the past, our studies show that the public does not view higher education in the same way as it views K-12 education. Colleges and universities still enjoy a much more sympathetic reception in the public's mind. Higher education is perceived as different and better, and, as we have remarked before, it seems to be immune to many of the criticisms made of K-12.

Converging Attitudes. How long can higher education enjoy its current immunity from many of the criticisms leveled against the K-12 schools? Obviously, we cannot make any accurate predictions on this topic. But there are signs of erosion of higher education's relatively stronger position in the public's eyes.

Business Executives: Equally Critical of Both Systems. The distinction between attitudes toward K-12 and higher education starts to evaporate when we look at the views of leadership groups, especially business executives. We have done several studies of leaders (including such groups as business executives, legislators, editors, and community leaders). Interestingly, these leadership groups are usually much more critical of K-12 schools than is the general public. But we have also found that leaders are more critical of higher education as well. Whereas the public seems to make a distinction between K-12 and higher education, at least some groups of leaders seem to be highly critical of both.

We asked educators, employers and college professors what a high school diploma from their local school actually means. As Table 3 shows, we found a wide divergence among the three groups, with educators most confident about the ability of the schools, and with professors and employers much more likely to be critical.¹⁸ Similarly, in regional surveys, we find that teachers think schools are doing a good job under difficult circumstances, but the majority of community leaders think that schools use social problems and lack of funding as a smoke screen for poor performance.¹⁹

Table 3
Different Opinions about the Meaning of a High School Diploma

Which of the following statements comes closer to your view?	Public School Teachers	College Professors	Employers
A high school diploma is no guarantee that the typical student has learned the basics	23%	73%	59%
or			
A high school diploma means that the typical student has at least learned the basics	76%	27%	39%

Source: *Reality Check*. Public Agenda. Survey conducted October 6 to November 16, 1998.

Our studies of leadership attitudes toward higher education, especially the attitudes of business executives, show a somewhat similar pattern. Business leaders do concede that America has the best higher education system in the world, but they are also extremely critical of the way colleges and universities are operated. On many questions regarding higher education, the views of business leaders are diametrically opposed to those of college professors (see Table 4). In individual interviews with business leaders, we heard the complaint that colleges and universities are inflexible, bureaucratic and unresponsive to change. Rather than seeing higher education as a leader in technology, many of the business executives we talked to considered the teaching approaches of higher education to be outmoded. For business leaders, the concept of tenure is almost a joke, and a lot of university research is seen as little more than resume padding. Business leaders want college professors to teach more students, make use of new technologies, and, generally, get their own house in order before asking for more financial support. In other words, business executives are just as critical of higher education as they are of K-12 education. Business leaders believe that both sides of the educational divide are hiding from accountability and avoiding the need for more comprehensive restructuring.

Business leaders believe that both sides of the educational divide are hiding from accountability.

Table 4
Different Opinions about Higher Education

Percent of business leaders and college professors who:	Business Leaders	College Professors
Believe colleges should reduce operating costs as a way to hold down the costs of attending college	88%	56%
Agree that higher education must become leaner and more efficient, just as business and government have had to do	83%	40%
Believe student loans are too easily available, allowing colleges to keep raising tuition instead of improving efficiency and cutting costs	72%	25%
Would favor increasing financial support from state and federal government if college costs continue to rise	65%	95%
Favor colleges adopting business practices to make them more efficient and productive	64%	17%
Think it is a serious problem that too many professors have light teaching loads	58%	26%
Believe tenure is essential to protecting academic freedom*	22%	78%

* Asked of tenured professors and business leaders only.

Source: *Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education*. Public Agenda. Survey conducted September 16 to October 16, 1998.

THE HONEYMOON IS OVER

This growing convergence of criticism should be of concern to educators. At least as far as the business community is concerned, the honeymoon is already over. A more fundamental question is whether other groups within the general public will come to share the business perspective. In our conversations with business leaders, it was immediately clear that they knew a great deal about higher education (compared to the general public's much more limited knowledge of higher education). Many business leaders have an undergraduate or even a graduate degree, many send their children to college, and many are much more knowledgeable about the system.²⁰ The questions that higher education leaders should be asking themselves are these: If business leaders, who are more knowledgeable, are also more critical of higher education, is this a harbinger of the future? Will other groups also become more critical as they learn more about higher education?



One of the most encouraging findings from our leadership studies is a high level of interest in breaking down some of the barriers between higher education and K-12 education. As we have noted already, there is a widely

shared concern among the leadership community that the K-12 schools are not adequately preparing students for higher education. For their part, K-12 educators often point out that one of their biggest problems is that colleges and universities are not doing an adequate job of training teachers.²¹ Instead of continuing the blame game, with each side pointing to the other for an explanation of their own failures, these two educational entities might be interested in the support we've found for their working more closely together.

We asked leaders to tell us what they see as the greatest problem for higher education and also to tell us what changes they think would be most beneficial. Significantly, the most commonly mentioned problem was that too many students need remedial education. Eighty-eight percent of all of the leaders interviewed (professors, college administrators, government leaders, and business executives) listed this as a very or somewhat serious concern.²² We presented the same respondents with a list of proposals intended to improve higher education. The one most often selected was to have higher education institutions directly collaborate with local K-12 schools to help prepare students for college. Fully 92% thought that this would be a very or somewhat effective way to improve higher education.²³

These leaders see collaboration as the most viable solution to the biggest problem facing higher education. One obvious area of collaboration might be around the area of standards. Public Agenda studies of attitudes toward K-12 education show that the public has an enormous interest in setting clear standards for what teachers should teach and what students should learn.²⁴ We see a similar interest among our leadership sample for higher standards in colleges and universities. Three in four leaders (75%) feel that raising admission standards would be either very or somewhat effective in improving higher education,²⁵ and 60% feel that it is a very or somewhat serious problem that too many colleges have academic standards that are too low.²⁶

Our findings show, in other words, that leaders do not conceive of the country's two educational systems as walled off from each other. For leaders (and especially business leaders), both systems are problematic, and both will need to work together to solve their common problems.

If business leaders, who are more knowledgeable, are also more critical of higher education, is this a harbinger of the future?

ENDNOTES

- ¹ *The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education*, Public Agenda. National survey of 700 adults, conducted February 2–8, 1998, with a margin of error of $\pm 4\%$. “Which statement comes closer to your own view: High school graduates should go on to college because in the long run they’ll have better job prospects, or high school graduates should take any decent job offer they get because there are so many unemployed people already?” Responses: Should go on to college, 86%; Should take any decent job offer, 9%; Don’t know, 5%.
- ² *Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think about Their Schools*, Public Agenda. National survey of 1,000 public high school students, conducted October 29 to November 20, 1996. “How close are each of these statements to the way you feel about school? It’s important for me to do well in school so I can get into college. Is that very close to how you feel, somewhat close, or not too close?” Responses: Very close, 85%; Somewhat close, 11%; Not too close, 4%; Don’t know, $<0.5\%$. “Do you think your parents or guardians would be very disappointed if you do not go to college?” Responses: Yes, 74%; No, 23%; Don’t know, 3%.
- ³ *Good News, Bad News: What People Really Think about the Education Press*, Public Agenda. National survey of 500 adults, conducted April 1–6, 1997, with a margin of error of $\pm 4\%$. “Where do you get the most useful information about what’s happening in the public schools in your community?” Responses: From conversations with people you know, 33%; From your own experience and observations, 22%; From news you get from TV, radio, or newspapers, 40%; School newsletter, 2%; Talking to kids, 1%; Someplace else/Other, 1%; Don’t know, 1%.
- ⁴ Gallup Organization (sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa). National survey of 1,151 adults, conducted June 5–23, 1998. “How about the public schools in the nation as a whole? What grade would you give the public schools nationally, A, B, C, D or Fail?” Responses: A, 1%; B, 17%; C, 49%; D, 15%; Fail, 5%; Don’t know, 13%. “Students are often given the grades, A, B, C, D, or Fail to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools themselves, in this community, were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools here—A, B, C, D, or Fail?” Responses: A, 10%; B, 36%; C, 31%; D, 9%; Fail, 5%; Don’t know, 9%.
- ⁵ *Too Little Knowledge is a Dangerous Thing: What the Public Thinks and Knows about Paying for College*, American Council on Education. National survey of 2,000 adults, conducted in fall 1997. “Would you say a four-year college education for your children/yourself is usually worth its price, sometimes worth its price, rarely worth its price, or never worth its price?” Responses: Usually, 59%; Sometimes, 27%; Rarely, 6%; Never, 4%; Don’t know/Refused, 4%. “Would you say an American automobile is usually worth its price, sometimes worth its price, rarely worth its price, or never worth its price?” Responses: Usually, 27%; Sometimes, 40%; Rarely, 18%; Never, 14%; Don’t know/Refused, 2%.

- ⁶ *Kids These Days '99: What Americans Really Think about the Next Generation*, Public Agenda. National survey of 1,005 adults, conducted December 1-8, 1998. "Which comes closer to your view? Given enough help and attention, just about all kids can learn and succeed in school or some kids just won't learn or succeed in school, no matter how much help and attention they get." Responses: Given enough help, just about all kids can succeed in school, 75%; Some kids won't succeed in school, no matter how much help they get, 20%; Both/Neither/Don't know, 5%.
- ⁷ *The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education*, Public Agenda. National survey of 700 adults, conducted February 2-8, 1998, with a margin of error of $\pm 4\%$. "Which of the following two statements comes closer to your own view: The benefit a student gets from attending college mostly depends on the quality of the college he or she is attending, or the benefit a student gets from attending college mostly depends on how much of an effort he or she puts in?" Responses: Quality of college, 7%; Student effort, 91%; Don't know, 2%.
- ⁸ *Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education*, Public Agenda. National mail survey of 601 leaders in academia, including 130 college professors, 163 college administrators and deans, 146 business executives, and 162 government officials, conducted September 16 to October 16, 1998. "Not everyone who starts college ends up graduating. Do you think college dropout rates are currently too high, too low, or about where they should be?" Responses: Business executives: Too high, 31%; About where they should be, 33%; Too low, 6%; Not sure, 31%. Professors: Too high, 26%; About where they should be, 39%; Too low, 9%; Not sure, 26%.
- ⁹ *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform*, Public Agenda. National survey of 1,200 adults, conducted May 12-25, 1995. "Which statement is more accurate for the students graduating from your local public schools: A high school diploma is no guarantee that the typical student has learned the basics, or a high school diploma means that the typical student has at least learned the basics?" Responses: Is no guarantee the student has learned the basics, 47%; Is a guarantee, 50%; Not sure, 4%.
- ¹⁰ *Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education*, Public Agenda. National mail survey of 601 leaders in academia, including 130 college professors, 163 college administrators and deans, 146 business executives, and 162 government officials, conducted September 16 to October 16, 1998. "Here are some things that may or may not be a problem for colleges. Please indicate how serious a problem you think each is: Too many new students need remedial education?" Responses: Very serious, 53%; Somewhat serious, 35%; Not too serious, 9%; Not at all serious, 1%; Not sure, 2%.
- ¹¹ *Reality Check*, Public Agenda. National survey of 708 parents with children currently attending public school in grades K-12; 700 K-12 public school teachers; 702 public school students in middle or high school; 252 employers who make hiring decisions for employees recently out of high school or college; and 257 college professors at two- or four-year colleges who have taught freshmen or sophomores in the last two years, conducted October 6 to November 16, 1998. "How would you rate recent job applicants/your freshmen or sophomore students when it comes to their grammar

- and spelling?" Responses: Professors: Excellent, 2%; Good, 20%; Fair, 44%; Poor, 34%; Don't know, 1%. Employers: Excellent, 2%; Good, 16%; Fair, 46%; Poor, 34%; Don't know, 2%. Published in *Education Week's Quality Counts '99* in January 1999.
- ¹² *The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education*, Public Agenda. National survey of 700 adults, conducted February 2–8, 1998, with a margin of error of $\pm 4\%$. "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: We should not allow the price of a college education to keep students who are qualified and motivated to go to college from doing this?" Response: Strongly agree, 66%; Somewhat agree, 23%; Somewhat disagree, 5%; Strongly disagree, 3%; Neither agree nor disagree, 1%; Don't know 2%.
- ¹³ *The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education*, Public Agenda. National survey of 700 adults, conducted February 2–8, 1998, with a margin of error of $\pm 4\%$. "Do you believe that currently in [INSERT STATE], the vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so, or do you think there are many people who are qualified to go but don't have the opportunity to do so?" Responses: Most qualified can go, 49%; Many qualified cannot go, 45%; Don't know, 5%.
- ¹⁴ *Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education*, Public Agenda. National mail survey of 601 leaders in academia, including 130 college professors, 163 college administrators and deans, 146 business executives, and 162 government officials, conducted September 16 to October 16, 1998. "Which better describes your state: The vast majority of qualified people who want to go to college find a way to pay for it, or many qualified people who want to go to college cannot find a way to pay for it?" Responses: Vast majority find a way to pay, 75%; Many cannot find a way to pay, 19%; Not sure, 6%.
- ¹⁵ *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform*, Public Agenda. National survey of 1,200 adults, conducted May 12–25, 1995. "If you could afford it, would you rather your children attend: a private, non-religious school; a private, religious school; or a public school?" Responses: Private, non-religious school, 21%; Private, religious school, 36%; Public school, 38%; Not sure, 5%.
- ¹⁶ Gallup Organization (sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa). National survey of 1,151 adults, conducted June 5–23, 1999. "Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?" Responses: Favor, 44%; Oppose, 50%; Don't know, 6%. See also Gallup Organization (sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa). National survey of 1,311 adults, conducted May 25 to June 15, 1995. "Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?" Favor, 33%; Oppose, 65%; Don't know, 2%. See also Gallup Organization (sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa). National survey of 1,306 adults, conducted May 21 to June 9, 1993. "Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?" Favor, 24%; Oppose, 74%; Don't know, 2%.
- ¹⁷ *Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform*, Public Agenda. National survey of 1,200 adults, conducted May 12–25, 1995. "If the public schools in

your community had been failing to give kids a quality education for 10 to 15 years, which of the following would you want done first?" Responses: Overhaul the public schools, 28%; Increase the money public schools get, 20%; Have the state government take over and run the local schools, 6%; Have companies that specialize in education run the local schools, 10%; Give parents vouchers to make private schools a more affordable option, 28%; Not sure, 8%.

- ¹⁸ *Reality Check, Public Agenda*. National survey of 708 parents with children currently attending public school in grades K-12; 700 K-12 public school teachers; 702 public school students in middle or high school; 252 employers who make hiring decisions for employees recently out of high school or college; and 257 college professors at two- or four-year colleges who have taught freshmen or sophomores in the last two years, conducted October 6 to November 16, 1998. "Which statement is more accurate for the students graduating from your local public schools: A high school diploma is no guarantee that the typical student has learned the basics, or a high school diploma means that the typical student has at least learned the basics?" Responses for teachers: Not a guarantee, 23%; Is a guarantee, 76%; Don't know, 1%. Responses for employers: Not a guarantee, 59%; Is a guarantee, 39%; Don't know, 1%. Responses for college professors: Not a guarantee, 73%; Is a guarantee, 27%; Don't know, <0.5%.
- ¹⁹ *Committed to Change: Missouri Citizens and Public Education*, Public Agenda. Survey of 500 Missouri residents, 245 Missouri educators and 211 Missouri community leaders conducted October 30 to November 7, 1995. "Which of the following comes closer to your own view: The schools are doing a pretty good job given the social problems and lack of funding they face, or the schools use social problems and lack of funding as excuses for their poor performance?" Responses for general public: Schools are doing a good job, 54%; Schools use problems as excuses, 39%; Don't know, 7%. Responses for educators: Schools are doing a good job, 90%; Schools use problems as excuses, 8%; Don't know, 2%. Responses for leaders: Schools are doing a good job, 40%; Schools use problems as excuses, 55%; Don't know, 4%. See also *Some Gains, But No Guarantees: How New York City's Employers Rate the Public Schools*, Public Agenda. Mail survey of 450 New York City business leaders, conducted March 26 to May 11, 1998.
- ²⁰ *Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education*, Public Agenda. National mail survey of 601 leaders in academia, including 130 college professors, 163 college administrators and deans, 146 business executives, and 162 government officials, conducted September 16 to October 16, 1998.
- ²¹ *Different Drummers: How Teachers of Teachers View Public Education*, Public Agenda. National survey of 900 professors of education, conducted July 9 to September 5, 1997.
- ²² *Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education*, Public Agenda. National mail survey of 601 leaders in academia, including 130 college professors, 163 college administrators and deans, 146 business executives, and 162 government officials, conducted September 16 to October 16, 1998. "Here are some things that may or may not be a problem for colleges. Please indicate how serious a problem

you think each is: Too many new students need remedial education." Responses: Very serious, 53%; Somewhat serious, 35%; Not too serious, 9%; Not at all serious, 1%; Not sure, 2%.

- ²³ *Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education*, Public Agenda. National mail survey of 601 leaders in academia, including 130 college professors, 163 college administrators and deans, 146 business executives, and 162 government officials, conducted September 16 to October 16, 1998. "Here are some proposals intended to improve higher education. Please indicate how effective each would be in improving colleges. What about directly collaborating with local K-12 schools to help prepare their students for college?" Responses: Very effective, 59%; Somewhat effective, 33%; Not too effective, 4%; Not effective at all, 3%; Not sure, 1%.
- ²⁴ *Reality Check*, Public Agenda. National survey of 708 parents, 700 teachers, 702 students, 252 employers and 257 college professors, conducted October 6 to November 16, 1998. Published in *Education Week's Quality Counts '99* in January 1999.
- ²⁵ *Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education*, Public Agenda. National mail survey of 601 leaders in academia, including 130 college professors, 163 college administrators and deans, 146 business executives, and 162 government officials, conducted September 16 to October 16, 1998. "Here are some proposals intended to improve higher education. Please indicate how effective each would be in improving colleges. What about raising student admission standards?" Responses: Very effective, 26%; Somewhat effective, 49%; Not too effective, 20%; Not effective at all, 3%; Not sure, 2%.
- ²⁶ *Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education*, Public Agenda. National mail survey of 601 leaders in academia, including 130 college professors, 163 college administrators and deans, 146 business executives, and 162 government officials, conducted September 16 to October 16, 1998. "Here are some things that may or may not be a problem for colleges. Please indicate how serious a problem you think each is: Too many colleges have academic standards that are too low." Responses: Very serious, 21%; Somewhat serious, 39%; Not too serious, 28%; Not at all serious, 8%; Not sure, 5%.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Immerwahr is a Senior Research Fellow at Public Agenda and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs at Villanova University. He has written several previous Public Agenda reports on higher education, including *The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education* (1998), *Preserving the Higher Education Legacy: A Conversation with California Leaders* (1995) and *The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System* (1993). In addition, he has authored and co-authored a number of other Public Agenda reports on education, including the groundbreaking national study, *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools* (1994) and, for the 1996 National Education Summit of the nation's governors and business leaders, *Americans' Views on Standards: An Assessment by Public Agenda* (1996). Other state-specific studies written by Dr. Immerwahr include *What Our Children Need: South Carolinians Look at Public Education* (1997), *Committed to Change: Missouri Citizens and Public Education* (1996), and *The Broken Contract: Connecticut Citizens Look at Public Education* (1993).

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